

Randall Fuller. *From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature*. Reprint Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. x + 251 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-936071-0.

Reviewed by Katherine Brackett Fialka

Published on H-War (September, 2015)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Since the end of the bloodiest conflict in American history, literary critics, authors, and historians have been paying attention to the “damned mob of scribbling women,” and men of course, who found their creative impulses stoked or altered by the Civil War.[1] Many scholars wondered how the war affected *who* contributed to American literary culture as well as *how* authors contributed—whether they already were active authors or ascribing newbies. Randall Fuller’s contribution, *From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature*, brings new, vibrant life and a realistic humanity to authors typically considered pillars of “the canon,” even as ideas of canon-ness are changing to allow for diversity.[2] Fuller’s attention to the struggle within authors caused by the war is interesting, complex, and admirable, and proves to be the greatest strength of the book. In addition, the book’s rich and descriptive prose will appeal to any reader, and its valuable reenvisioned portraits of well-known writers are useful, especially alongside the clear and cohesive historical narrative supplied by the author.

While each chapter tends to focus on a particular writer, the book also takes a roughly chronological shape from just before the war to several years after. Around his cast of main characters (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily

Dickinson, Louisa May Alcott, Frederick Douglass, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville), Fuller develops a number of supporting roles, including Theodore Winthrop, Moncure Daniel Conway, Henry David Thoreau (or rather, his legacy), and James Russell Lowell (among many others). While the impressions, concerns, and artistry of the panoply of authors remain front and center, the reader will not lose sight of the war, which frames the changes in the authors that Fuller describes.

The first two chapters grapple with how authors strove to make meaning of the start of war. Chapter 1 recreates the Boston and Brooklyn enclaves of artists quite well, turning to Whitman to capture how some authors reacted to the war’s outbreak. Fuller describes how the defeat at Bull Run devastated the poet, disturbing “him for years” (pp. 28-29). Rather than seeing “Beat! Beat! Drums!” as a triumphant and patriotic piece, Fuller contends that Whitman was more comfortable than most of his contemporaries with expressing the downsides of war. In other words, the “social costs of war” were not lost in the thrills of patriotism for him (p. 31). Chapter 2 continues this theme, describing Hawthorne’s intense discomfort with the ardor for war that animated many New England authors. Concerned with “their certainty, their self-righteousness, their fa-

naticism, and their scarcely concealed bloodlust,” Hawthorne questioned how these authors lauded and applauded the violence of John Brown despite the murkiness of the morality of his actions (p. 42). In “Chiefly about War Matters,” Hawthorne editorialized his own text, allowing himself to express his misgivings about the celebration of violence and vengeance and war while also satirizing the no-questions-asked support for war from the side of many of his fellow New Englanders.

For Fuller’s authors, everything changed with Shiloh. The unstated or understated discomfort with the potential consequences of war became more pronounced for chapter 3’s authors after seeing how modern warfare affected human bodies, minds, and the landscape. While Emerson still hoped that “Moral Forces” could help regenerate “social improvement,” making the conflict a “holy war,” Melville disagreed entirely (p. 56). Emerson’s optimism proved to be too much for Melville, who felt that through the war, the nature of evil itself became more complicated. Was evil merely about “perspective” anymore? Despite his misgivings, his poem “Shiloh. A Requiem” ultimately drew an image of “the hope of a redemptive afterlife for those who sacrificed for their country” (p. 69).

Chapter 4 describes the beguiling artistic relationship between “Secret Six” abolitionist Thomas Wentworth Higginson and America’s favorite recluse, Dickinson. Fuller argues that Dickinson hoped to “produce something vital and new from the waning tradition and threatened beliefs of a previous generation” (p. 79). The “tradition” he focuses on is that of divine design, of Providence. In fact, he argues, Dickinson viewed the violence of war as punishment for religious doubt. Yet the war inspired the most “creative phase” of her life, as she wrote “a poem a day, sometimes more” starting in late 1862 (p. 82). As the war inspired Dickinson to artistic action, it also spurred Higginson’s enlistment and service as a captain for the

51st Massachusetts, which temporarily halted his correspondence with Dickinson.

Higginson’s story continues in chapter 5, which describes Port Royal, the newly freed slave safe haven that became the recruiting grounds for such regiments as the 51st Massachusetts. Like many abolitionists (and many Americans in general), Higginson harbored questions about if and how former slaves would fight for their freedom. Placing commentary from Douglass (the most outspoken proponent for black soldiers) alongside Higginson’s experiences in South Carolina in recruitment, training, and combat puts the idealism of abolitionists like him in check. In fact, after experiencing his first bout with real combat, Higginson resigned his commission and returned to New England.

The next three chapters center on the personal, physical, and moral costs of war. “Fathers and Sons,” chapter 6, compellingly portrays Emerson’s complicated relationship between his willingness to sacrifice blood and lives for liberty and his hesitance to *personally* volunteer his own sons for the cause. Emerson embraced the emancipatory cause of the war, celebrating the common white and black soldier, but after reeling from the deaths of Robert Gould Shaw and others, he found the limits of his overwhelmingly optimistic view of war. This “inner conflict between his highest ideals and his love for [his son] Edward” became the “great private drama of his war years” (p. 130). Emerson made his choice, and it was in favor of family. When an acquaintance offered him a commission for his son with the 54th Massachusetts after Shaw’s death, he declined.

In chapter 7, “Phantom Limbs,” Fuller uses Whitman, Alcott, and Silas Weir Mitchell to discuss the physical impact of war—for wounded soldiers and amputees, and those who helped them recover after injury. Whitman’s experiences in war hospitals following his brother George’s wounding shaped his writing in *Drumtaps*, while also affecting his body physically (he developed

“hospital malaria”) (p. 156). Alcott’s time serving in a hospital inspired one of her most famous characters, Tribulation Periwinkle, and like Whitman, nearly killed her (she contracted typhoid pneumonia, and the treatment of calomel caused terrible mercury poisoning). Perhaps the most interesting analysis comes from Fuller’s treatment of doctor and neurological researcher Mitchell, who described the phantom limb phenomenon as well as shell-shock for the first time. His own foray into fiction was a story in *The Atlantic*, “The Case of George Dedlow,” which explored the physical, emotional, and psychological experiences of becoming and being an amputee. All in all, Fuller found that first-hand observation of the carnage of war forced authors to deal with the consequences of prolonged fighting.

We return to Hawthorne to explore the moral costs of war and the changing American literary aesthetic in chapter 8. As romanticism waned in popularity and realism took the stage, Hawthorne “struggled to respond to the aesthetic and moral challenges created by the war” (p. 165). Increasingly, he found literature less and less relevant or useful for making sense of the world. In writing a novel—*The Elixir of Life*, or *The Dolliver Romance*—Hawthorne found himself unable to maintain an “authorial distance” from his subject (p. 172). Though his novel was about the Revolutionary War in subject, themes, concerns, and ideas from the Civil War constantly plagued him.

Chapters 9 and 10 consider how American authors made sense of the latter stages of the war as well as its end. In *Battle Pieces and Aspects of the War*, Melville hoped that Americans would “accept a less arrogant and more tragic vision of life” (p. 195). To him, the chaos, death, and carnage of war demanded “new language, new modes of expression” to convey new truths (p. 196). The reading public—after years of self-examination and doubt—had little interest in more self-criticism. Fuller closes his book with Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s vision of heaven in *The Gates Ajar* and its

efforts to help Americans come to terms with the overwhelming amount of loss and death after the war. He leaves the reader with Whitman’s sad realization that “death, not poetry, had knit the nation together” (p. 219).

As previously mentioned, the writing in this volume is vivid and entertaining. Fuller pays close attention to the camera’s lens, zooming in on particular scenes but always reminding the reader of the bigger picture as well. He artfully weaves together the human, literary, and historical narratives while offering a wide scope of how literature itself changed during the war. However, some historians may have questions about the project’s organization and use of historiography. Fuller’s arguments demonstrate a familiarity with current historiography, but his endnotes are quite scant and lack secondary material from many recent publications. Perhaps the book is intended for a nonacademic audience. This audience may also explain why Fuller chose to focus on so-called canonical authors—even those who did not enjoy much critical or popular success with their contemporaries, or at least for the pieces he uses in the book (with Alcott, Whitman, and Phelps as exceptions). Still, this is hardly just a book about well-known authors. It does much to capture how the experience of war forced deeply intuitive and reflective American writers to change the ways they represented the world around them. Perhaps, then, the work still to be done is in understanding how regular Americans responded to how authors depicted the war, and how these people—as far from canonical as conceivable—wrote the war their way.

Notes

[1]. This well-known quotation predates the Civil War (1855) but reflects the sentiment of Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of the authors who receives lengthy treatment in this book. For several examples, see Edmund Wilson, *Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962);

Daniel Aaron, *The Unwritten War: American Writers and the Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973); George Frederickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Alice Fahs, *The Imagined Civil War: Popular Literature of the North and South, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Sarah Gardner, *Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004); and Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

[2]. Scholars of literature also seem more inclined to question the usefulness of thinking of literature in terms of a canon.

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Citation: Katherine Brackett Fialka. Review of Fuller, Randall. *From Battlefields Rising: How the Civil War Transformed American Literature*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. September, 2015.

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